

THE DEATH OF THE INNOCENTS

by

Marcel B. Matley

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OF THE INNOCENTS

a dramatic poem in

five parts

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PART ONE: PROLOGUE

With breath alive within our breast,
with senses five at our behest,
with blood bowels bone flesh,
our souls and bodies treasure life.
We seek our peace, avoid the strife
and hope for what our whole refresh.

We think: Perhaps the past was best,
our present time the most distressed.
We judge one age the best to die
when judging of another's fate:
That one's too soon,
the next too late;
shirking the thought:
In graves we'll lie.

Today we speak of death; not which
befell the mighty or the rich,
nor came by plagues
nor came by chance,
not which the brave
in wars have sought
nor first the dead
had faced in thought.
Mere babes have danced
this deathly dance.

Were these innocents due to die
for sins that first in Eden lie?
Or have they sinned by being born
in midst of famine, social strain,
at cost of wealth, maternal pain,
unto a world by problems torn?

It may be best they die the first
of Christian saints;
or, far the worst,
their killers justly
hellward trudge.
I know the story which I tell
with trust my verse
is written well.
I shall not set myself to judge.

Note: Second to last line of
Prologue to be read thus when
reciting: "With trust my verse
is spoken well."

PART TWO: HEROD AND THE MAGI

Herod speaks

I welcome both of you to my poor land,
and in your quest

I offer friendship's hand.

Long have I ruled

this Jewish commonwealth

in open justice,

banning treachery's stealth.

How hard upon my heavy burdened heart
lies weight that when

I well am dead, then start
fraternal conflict,

civil strife most foul,

rending of the social fabric, howls,

hateful blows, deadly schemes & war

which our Augustan world-wide

peace would mar.

Those sects who seek

ascendency and power

shall have stearn Roman

vengeance on them shower.

Welcome is the godly news you bring;
Jahweh himself annointed Judah's king;
of David's House in Bethlehem was born
who'll mend our polity so sorely torn.

The first Magus speaks

Are we so welcomed

in our travels here?

Your welcome's much more

welcomed to our ear.

Far is the distance,

long is the journey we made;

fast we went

in fear our star would fade.

We suffered hunger, thirst,

much cost and theft,

but others' scorn

was burden's greatest heft.

Who would traverse such deserts,

cross each mount,

and seek not wealth

but holy wisdom's fount?

And who would ask

companionship with us?

None save Herod,

great and prosperous.

The second Magus speaks

My fellow Magus' well considered word
accept, Just King,

who merit all we heard

to honor you.

Herod speaks

Good Magi, I accept,
while owning
that for God the credit's kept.
You'd do me honor? Best give me joy.
Relate what witful magic you employ
to grasp the secret
message of the Lord.
By revelation only, known, adored
and named the God of Israel is he.
Thru prophets learn,
thru priests we pray and plea;
the Gentile world
by us shall see the light.
How great the wonder!
In the star filled night
you found the esoteric key to faith;
your secrets share,
to firm me on my path.

The first magus speaks

We, brothers by both parents,
worked for years
to turn to our advantage
others' fears.
Preferring guile to justice, foolery

to wisdom's guidance and to liberty
the servitude of tyranny and gain,
no virtue just could we attain.
Did we employ a magic goodly, witful?
Rather, magic makes the mind fitful,
driving wisdom,
courage, prudence out.
Our astrology was greedy,
not devout,
until we realized each charted star
keeps ordered service in its orb.
None mar
fair nature's wholesome,
seamless tapestry
save we, who changed
our ways repentently.
To prove our hearts converted
to this king,
our wealth
and elements of craft we bring.
The things which evil used
become his use;
this way ourselves
from folly can we loose.

Herod speaks

Well spoken, wise
and justly Magus. I err
by inauspicious terms which may deter
your telling me
how came this grace to you.
Relate your story
straight, detailed and true.

The second Magus speaks

Two years past this coming wintertime
we saw a star a stranger to our clime.
We judged it portent
of divine new season.
Studying all views of faith & reason
we found one God of universal might
whom holiness and justice but delight.
A God not creature of a people's whim
but Father to a nation honoring him.
His chosen race the stock of Abraham;
yet truly Lord
of Japheth, Sem and Cham.
To us, as once to Nineveh, he sent
an angel messenger to say: "Repent!
Have done with evil ways,
God's task to face

and manifest to all his saving grace."
From out Arabia we journeyed forth;
each night our omened star
led west by north.
We braved elements and our own fear;
now wearied, yet eager,
tonight we go from here
to find, in unknown home,
this child of peace.

Herod speaks

To sin-bound men
your message brings release.
Tarry no longer, but hurry, go!
Your star shines even now to show
the road you wander till you find
our common king. But mind!
I make ready to go.
Send word that I might know
who owns my royalty
and my loyalty.

The second Magus speaks

We shall return
to bring you information;
whom you yearn to offer adoration.

Alone. Herod speaks this soliloquy

Well Herod, once more but heavenward
comes threat
 to snatch your rightful crown.
Again pernicious Arab plots
 are hatched,
conspiring with these
 wretched Israelites
to challenge Rome.
 Yet worse, to challenge me
who guard frontiers
 which even Caesars can't.
Hah! Caesars! Seven I manipulate
in turn, to each an enemy then friend.
With ease should naked power dominate,
yet Herod turned
 Rome's power to his ploy.
Oh, Shameless Fortune,
 knowing not who best
can use your gifts,
 you squander chance on fools.
They stand upon the crossroads
 of the world,
these Jews, who wasted
 fivefold kingdoms great.
This last they used
 to gather vanquished foreskins!

How small my price
 to snatch Hasmonean throne.
So I rule over David's realm.
 Oh would
that they were worthy
 of my leadership!
For if the Jewish state
 were wise as Rome,
Augustus would be Herod
 - and Herod he!
Those Magi, wise & learned.
 Goodsome fools!
They'll do my will
 and save me price of spies.
But now's the time my dynasty unites.
To start, I'll summon
 all my several sons.
 No. Half and half again have paid
for traitor's role
 and cursed ambition's plot.
As has my choicest bride,
 sweet Mariamne.
Mother too. And most my Idumeans.
Let the watchful king
 but slightly nod,
he finds there's none to trust,
 not even God!

PART 3: MAGI DEPART SECRETLY

An Angel speaks to the Magi

Your gifts you brought;
your homage paid.
You must evade
what Herod sought.
He lied to you.
He'll strike with sword
the newborn Lord.
The child's father too
was warned: "Depart
by secret way."
So leave this day.
Right now. Make start!

The first Magus speaks

Dear guardian angel,
 who thru these years
has guided us & succored us in tears,
a pledge we gave to mighty Herod king
to take him news
 about this wondrous thing.
you need not fear
 for safety of this babe,
for

The Angel speaks

Which of us
is messenger
and counselor
of God most glorious?

The second Magus speaks

Obediently we go.

Herod speaks on hearing
of the Magi's departure

What sort of Lord is this
to lead the wise amiss?
Is God, who candor made,
by broken word obeyed?
He played on me deceit;
I'll lay the just receipt
upon this newborn's head;
he'll pay in others' stead.
Which male child might he be?
Damn all by one decree!

PART 4: INNOCENTS OF BETHLEHEM DIE

The Captain speaks to the soldiers

A soldier's duty is a sacred trust;
his own rebellious heart
he must distrust.

Informed authority the larger scheme
surveys and can
the course of justice deem.

A harmful growth the doctors cut away
with healthy flesh
so illness gains no sway.

You are the scalpel
in King Herod's hand;
your only sin: to fail in his command.
Here is the list of babes
who chance might be
usurper to the throne. Do your duty!

First house

FATHER: You may not, in violation of
the law, take my child away for
execution.

SOLDIER: There is a newly sanctioned

law, whereby all males under two
years of age in Bethlehem and its
district must die.

FATHER: Note well in your report
that once I knew what the law required
of me, I made no objection.

Second house

SOLDIER: Madame, I know how well
you love your son. Yet love for one's
country should be as great, for a son
is only part of one's country. We
have to be sure the one child we are
after is killed or even more sons
will have to die later.

MOTHER: You need not preach to me of
my patriotic duty. I gave my father
& husband as soldiers who died for
this country. Now my son is a sol-
dier and shall be honored for his death.

Third house

YOUNG UNWED MOTHER: I could never

have been a bride & would always be a shame to my family. And the poor child, growing up an outcast. He is saved from that.

Fourth house

SOLDIER: I'm very sorry. This is the only house with two sons of the proscribed age. And such bright eyed twins of spirit; much like my own. I promise they'll die painlessly.

GRANDFATHER: Well, maybe it's all for the best. The family is too big. We would not have enough food for the other children if these two had to be fed all winter.

Fifth house

HUSBAND: Dear sweet wife, be consoled in your loss. He was our first and only child, but we are still young. Besides, without the great cost of the baby whom we really couldn't afford, we can get the things we needed but

never had. He would say the same thing if he could, for he loved you.

WIFE: Sweetheart, what a good husband and father you are. As you said before, we should accept reality & do our best. Tomorrow, we will get the alabaster table we always wanted & put it in his special play corner to remind us of him.

Sixth house

SOLDIER: And so, sir, political necessity demands that we be sure to take the one child with whom the House of David plans to start a new dynasty.

FATHER, AFTER THE SOLDIER LEAVES:
What nonsense! Does he really believe it? Anyway, what are a few dead babies in the list of Herod's bloody deeds? At least I know of another who lost a son as I have. He will surely join the Hasmonean Party. Herod, you did yourself not me ill by murdering my child, for we heirs of Judas Machabeas will grow stronger.

Captain to the soldiers

Seven suspects sought; seven
killed. The body count tallies.
Well done, men. Sargeant, form
ranks and march the company
back to Fort Herodion. There
will be a full dressed review
tomorrow at reveille.

A soldier to his companion

I thought there were eight
children who had to be killed.

His companion

There are eight. The Captain
is taking care of the eighth
one himself. In Rama, near
Rachel's tomb, at his own home.

The lamentation
of the Captain's wife

Dear Rachel, sweet Rachel,
would that I could bury
sorrow's memory in your tomb.

Oh Rachel, good Rachel,
would that tears could sooth the pain
of following, yet following that bier.

May my voice be heard in Rama,
the voice of many Rachels unconsoled
wailing for their infants
who are no more.

A cruel new maidenhood
is pressed upon me,
as paternal sword strikes damnation
to the suckling at my breast.

PART FIVE: EPILOGUE

My verse is done.
In us though
 the story is never done.
That tyrants might rule
 or merchants prosper,
for sake of those
 with stronger wants,
lest Caesars be displeased,
would we think
 one babe is well dead?
Like fearful fools,
 when evil makes demand,
do we prefer to shed our freedom?
To establish a vision of justice,
could we brave a mocking word,
much more, a threatening sword?
We can scorn a moral star
to buy a candle;
but whose life shall be the price?

The end.